

Equal Opportunity for the Privileged and the Unprivileged in Islam

Islam, the complete code of life for the entire humanity, contains guidance for all sections and classes of humanity as it contains directions covering the different states and aspects of human life like grief and joy, success and failure, childhood and adulthood, and what not. Noted Islamic scholar, Syed Sulaiman Nadvi (1884-1953) describes the comprehensiveness and completeness of Islamic teachings and more importantly that of the Holy Prophet's (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) life in his inimitable, eloquent style as follows:

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"It is impossible for all the people owing allegiance to a particular religion to belong to a single category of humans. The very basis of this world lies in the division of labour and variation in professions. ... The world needs kings, presidents and rulers just as it requires obedient and faithful subjects; it needs jurists and judges and also army commanders; rich people as well as poor people; ... A human life which is a collection of the different manifestations of various human categories and their physical and emotional states is to be found nowhere but in the life of the Holy Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) alone. If you are a rich person, then follow the footsteps of the trader of Makka and Bahrain; if you are poor, listen to the story of the prisoner of Abu Talib Valley and penniless guest of Madina; as a king you can find guidance in the account of the King of Arab and if you are a subject, have a look at the life of the oppressed subject of Quraish (before the Prophet's hijrah); if you are a victor, the conqueror of Badr and Hunain can be your role model and if you have been vanquished in a battle, then take lessons from the story of the Battle of Uhud; if you are a teacher, then look up to the holy teacher of the school of Suffa (a platform-like structure in Masjid Nabavi) and as a student, you can get inspiration from the disciple of Jibril, the Trustworthy (angel) ..." (*Khutbaat e Madras*, p. 83, 85-86)

Islam, in fact, belongs equally to all sections of the society. It is as much a poor man's religion as it is a rich man's, it holds as much hope of getting to the top for a businessman as for a farmer. A person from the city has no less prospect of attaining the highest positions than a rural man and vice versa. But here we will mainly discuss the equality of opportunity for only the rich and the poor in Islam.

Virtues of the Rich

A hadith narrated by both Bukhari and Muslim clearly demonstrates the position of advantage the rich enjoy with regard to attaining high status in the Hereafter.

- Abu Huraira reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: The poor migrants visited the Prophet and complained to him: "The rich people have taken hold of the highest positions and everlasting favours of Paradise."

"How do you say that?" the holy Prophet asked.

"They offer namaz as we do and they observe fasts like us, but unlike us they give away sadaqas (money in charity) which we cannot and they free slaves which we are unable to do."

"Shouldn't I teach you a deed which if you perform, you will be able to catch up with those who have surpassed you, and get far ahead of those who are just behind you. No one will be better placed than you except those who do this deed like you." The Prophet replied.

"Of course, O Allah's Prophet. Do tell us."

"After every namaz, say Subhaan Allah (Glory be to Allah), Alhamdulillah (Praise be to Allah) and Allahu Akbar (Allah is great) 33 times each."

(A few days later) they returned complaining again, "Our wealthy friends have come to know of this special deed of ours. They have also started performing this special act as we do."

"That is Allah's Bounty. He graces with it whomsoever he likes." (Bukhari, Muslim, Riyaz 571)

Several other hadiths also underscore the high position of a thankful rich person in Islam. A thankful rich person is the one who earns money through halal (just and lawful) ways and spends it as he has been directed in the Sharia. He considers all his belongs to be a gift from Allah, so he never forgets the rights of Allah and Allah's servants in his wealth.

- Abdullah bin Masood reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: Other than two (kinds of) persons, no one should be coveted (envied): one, whom Allah has bestowed with wealth and also guided him towards spending it where it is due; and the other, whom Allah has bestowed with knowledge and wisdom, and he applies them in his life and teaches them. (Bukhari, Muslim, Riyaz 569)
- Abdullah bin Umar reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: Other than two (kinds of) persons, no one should be coveted (envied): one, whom Allah has bestowed with (the knowledge of) the Quran, and he recites it in the hours of days and nights; and the other whom Allah has bestowed with wealth, and he spends it in the hours of days and nights. (Bukhari, Muslim, Riyaz 570)

Virtues of the Poor

There are many hadiths which describe the virtues of poor people in general. Here are a few of them:

1. Usama bin Zaid reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: I stood at the door of Paradise and I found that the overwhelming majority of those who entered therein was that of poor persons and the wealthy persons were detained to get into that. The denizens of Hell were commanded to get into Hell, and I stood upon the door of Fire and the majority amongst them who entered there was that of women. (Sahih Muslim 36:6596, Riyazus salihien 256)
2. Ibn Abbas reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: I had a chance to look into the Paradise and I found that majority of the people was poor and I looked into the Fire and there I found the majority constituted by women. (Sahih Muslim 36:6597, Riyazus salihien 486)
3. Abu Huraira reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: The poor will enter the Paradise before the rich by 500 years. (Tirmizi, Riyaz 485)

The last hadith only says that poor people will enter before the rich. This does not necessarily mean that the poor will be allotted higher ranks in the Paradise than the rich. In fact, even though the rich will enter the Paradise later, some among them like Hazrat Usman, Zubair Bin Awwam, Abdur Rahman Bin Auf (رضي الله عنهم) will be allotted very high positions compared to the average poor.

As for the large number of poor people in Paradise, it is because most of the rich people are accustomed to being obeyed; submission to Allah's Will and the Prophet's command, i.e. Islam, proves to be completely contrary to their habit. So most of them out of arrogance and vanity do not embrace Islam or if they do, then do not observe all the commands of Islam. On the other hand, the quality of modesty and humility of the poor makes obeying Islamic commands easier for the poor. As Allama Iqbal (1873-1938) says:

زحمتِ روزہ جو کرتے ہیں گوارا تو غریب
پردہ رکھتا ہے اگر کوئی تمہارا تو غریب
زندہ ہے ملتِ بیضا غریبا کے دم سے

جا کے ہوتے ہیں مساجد میں صفِ آرا تو غریب
نام لیتا ہے اگر کوئی ہمارا تو غریب
امراء نشہ دولت میں ہیں غافل ہم سے

It's the poor who form saffs in, mosques
It's the poor who continuously remember Us,
The rich, intoxicated with wealth, are
unmindful of Us,

The poor only bear the troubles of fasting,
The poor only cast a veil on your sins,
The radiant community of Islam remains alive only because
of the poor.

Looking at both kinds of verses and hadiths, it becomes clear that both the poor and the rich are equally placed in the competition for high rewards in the Hereafter. Both are Adam's sons and Allah's creations, so neither will be placed at a disadvantage just because he belongs to a certain economic class.